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SUBJECT: IMPROVING THE ANNUAL HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT PROCESS

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: At the conclusion of the department's annual process of updating and editing the Human Rights Report, embassies Tirana and Chisnau would like to make the following observations regarding the substance of the reports, the process of updating them from the field, and the process of editing information in partnership with the Office of Democracy, Labor and Human Rights (DRL). In discussions among several posts, it is clear that many in the field are dissatisfied with a process that can be unnecessarily burdensome, as well as with the end result, and have serious concerns that the negative trends discussed below are being entrenched rather than reversed. As a result, the report, which has in the past been a forceful statement of USG policy and leadership on human rights, may undercut U.S. policy by obscuring major trends with minutiae, giving undue weight to the opinions of non-U.S. actors, and failing to reflect the best judgment of embassy officials on the ground. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Since its inception, the annual Human Rights Country Report has been a key Department priority and a valuable instrument of U.S. foreign policy. The status of human rights worldwide has important ramifications for U.S. policy, asylum requests, foreign funding requests, and most importantly the issues and obstacles faced by the millions around the world who are denied basic rights and freedoms. For these reasons, the accuracy, readability, and brevity of the report are imperative.

¶3. (SBU) At the same time, officers in the field face competing priorities and limited resources. The volume of work required to update the report each year increases because of expanding guidance and changing regulations. Posts are happy to undertake all extra efforts which are commensurate with the importance of the document, and which lead to improvements commensurate with those efforts. However, in recent years, managers at posts and desks have observed a substantial increase in frequently unproductive work for human rights officers in the field during the editing process. Posts note several examples of this trend: editors have expanded their role beyond editing to include the cross-examination of substantive contributions from posts; editors conduct substantial research on their own to include additional cases, examples, and general information not suggested by posts and often impossible to verify at post; editors request and make substantive changes in reporting to include a level of detail that is not set out in annual guidance; editors make changes in vocabulary and syntax which make no difference to the meaning of the text, but must be responded to by posts. To combat these issues, and produce a report that is streamlined, easily digestible and relevant, posts put forward the following suggestions for the editing process.

¶4. (SBU) Establish tight time limits for turnaround: Posts provide their first draft of an updated report in late September or early October each year. However, it is routinely eight to twelve weeks before posts receive feedback and comments from the Department. Posts then face a deadline of two weeks or so to respond to detailed

requests for information as well as contradictions of facts reported by posts from the field. This constricted editing time places difficult restrictions on posts' time and resources, particularly occurring each year during the holiday season when host government and NGO interlocutors are away from their offices. The timeframe also fails to allow for clearance time at post, which can be two to four days. Placing a time limit of four to six weeks on the beginning of the process would be a significant benefit, both for drafters at post as well as the Department's editors, who would have time to excel in the editorial work in which they have expertise.

¶5. (SBU) Restrict editors' work to editing: This will improve turnaround time while making the document more concise and easy to read. Beyond correcting errors of grammar and spelling, editors should ensure that examples are correctly placed in each section, prune superfluous material and impermissible language, question apparent contradictions, request clarification of vague language, and change non-standardized language. In addition, posts should be able to identify clearly which editor made changes to facilitate direct communication with that party on clarifications. User information identifying each editor should be a part of any tracked changes.

¶6. (SBU) Resist the temptation to add uncorroborated and unconfirmed information: By refraining from adding to the substance of post reporting beyond the cases originally cited, editors can streamline the editing and clearing processes while producing a document that presents cogent, persuasive facts from authoritative sources. The information posts provide each year is based on research and reporting in the field. It can be important to include information from other sources such as respected NGOs, which posts routinely consult to provide context and clarity. However, overall, the report should reflect local experts' best judgment each year on the updated human rights situation on the ground. Basic facts of this assessment need not be supplemented with unsubstantiated sources from internet searches, academic papers or often-dated NGO reports written by other than local experts.

¶7. (SBU) As is commonly known, many internet sources can be outdated, speculative, or poorly sourced and therefore unsuitable for contribution to the HRR. When included, such information cannot be easily removed, and requests for subsequent annual updates become problematic when original sourcing is unconfirmed by post. Random examples from internet searches often lack nuance and context and can contradict the report's overall themes and message. Finally, NGOs, even the most well-respected ones, represent a different perspective and agenda from the USG's on many human rights issues. The responsibility for the accuracy of the substance of the HRR ultimately lies with the Department of State rather than with outside organizations or governments, and this is best ensured by using our own information and sources known, vetted, and trusted by embassies.

¶8. (SBU) Restrict the report to the scope of the guidance: Among an editor's primary responsibilities should be to ensure the report provides what is necessary according to annually updated accepted guidance - no more and no less than required. The inclusion from editors of additional examples and information not called for by guidance further extends an already unwieldy document rather than making it more succinct. Despite 2007's welcome guidance that the HRR should be pruned five to 20 percent, posts found that editors' comments and inclusions often did not respect this in practice. This level of detail, outside of the guidance, both detracts from the substance of the document and creates an increasingly time-consuming process in which the quantity of time invested does not yield higher quality.

¶9. (SBU) Overall, posts believe that the current process produces a document which undercuts U.S. leadership on human rights by outsourcing foreign policy through the championing of NGO information above posts', focusing on a level of detail that detracts from the overall message rather than supporting its themes, and diminishing posts' reporting capabilities for an extended period of time while officers and FSNs conduct further research, seek to confirm additional data and examples through contacts, and defend their own work on the HRR to their colleagues. In close partnership with DRL, posts want to produce an annual Human Rights Report that is accurate, nuanced, and succinct while fully meeting its

Congressional mandate. We look forward to working on new ways to meet this goal.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: As a congressionally mandated report, the HRR necessarily responds to the concerns of a domestic constituency. However, its wider audience is the foreign public, particularly those with the ability or influence to confront cited human rights abuses and make changes for the better. Outdated, one-sided or unconfirmed information undermines the credibility of the report itself, gives governments the opportunity to dismiss its content as an inaccurate reflection of their society, and prevents human rights advocates from utilizing one of our most effective tools. Tirana and Chisnau put forward this assessment with a constructive spirit aimed at restoring the HRR to its original strength. We welcome the comments of the Department and other posts.

WITHERS